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Probing Helms & Co.

Thomas Powers on 30 Years of CIA Secrets

By Lee Lescaze

When Thomas Powers decided to write a biography of Richard Helms he set himself an elusive target.

After a long Central Intelligence Agency career ending with 6½ years as director and including official and dinner-table contacts with all the powerful of Washington, Helms' name peppers the written record of his times, but his nature, his thoughts, his likes and dislikes have been as closely guarded as the secrets he so doggedly protected. As Powers writes in "The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA," Helms left few tracks.

Again and again Powers asked Helms' friends and former associates to tell a Helms story, to quote Helms' most characteristic saying, to give him something to color the Helms story with what news-magazine writers call "quotes, jokes and anecdotes."

"A lot of them asked me, 'Why are you writing a book about Helms?' They'd tell me there were a dozen more interesting agency guys," Powers said in an interview.

The quotes, jokes and anecdotes are few and far between. After all, Helms is a man who seems to have gotten angry only once in his life with anyone watching, when he cursed TV correspondent Daniel Schorr.

For Powers, however, there was a stronger attraction than the good yarns that spice other CIA biographies.

"Helms was the only guy on whose head history fell," Powers said. Helms was involved in the whole course of the CIA's history, and he was standing in the spotlight when the roof fell in. His career offers an ideal pathway through the secret history of 30 years," Powers writes.

Powers' book follows that pathway, and according to a number of reviews, does it well. John Le Carré called the book "a splendid spy story," and all the better for being nonfiction. Ward Just wrote, "That we can understand the real nature of the CIA at all, and understand the CIA's role in American foreign policy since World War II is due to this remarkable book." And John Leonard pulled out all the stops,

calling it "the best book on the CIA ever written."

In the spring of 1976, Powers knew only one CIA employe, had never worked on stories about intelligence, but had become fascinated by the accounts of CIA misdeeds spilling out of Washington.

"These guys were doing a lot of things in my name and with my money," Powers said. Armed with a magazine assignment from Rolling Stone, Powers set out to satisfy his curiosity about what the CIA was really like.

"I honestly anticipated that I'd walk into an unbreachable stone wall," he said. Instead, Powers found that large numbers of the CIA's first generation had retired just before or during the upheavals that brought the ugly secrets which the agency had called "the family jewels" into the headlines.

These men had been reading the criticism of the agency and listening to the calls for reform and they'd been brooding. They thought the CIA was getting a bum rap.

"They were really quite open," Powers said. "CIA people are much easier to talk to than elected officials. They haven't had the endless practice in public prevarication."

"The important thing wasn't the first meeting, but the second or third," Powers said. By then, his sources realized that what they told him was not going to be in print in a matter of days.

"One of the worst moments he had trying to establish his credibility came at his first interview. He had called Thomas Parrot, a retired CIA official, who invited him over the next day.

Powers arrived to find Parrot had been listening to radio broadcasts of a just-released Rolling Stone story by Howard Kohn that charged the CIA with a series of new misdeeds, including a gift of \$1 million to former New York governor and Republican presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey.

"I'm not sure I want to talk to you," Parrot said in greeting Powers. Parrot

"Sometimes, I would be talking to one of these guys and I would notice that his wife or one of his children was listening, lurking in the background," Powers said. "They'd never heard this stuff before."

Neither, of course, had Powers, and if some of the stories had gone the rounds among CIA people, Powers was a fresh ear for old chestnuts.

After he had been working on the book for some time, Powers said, "I began to have something to offer besides an ear." Powers had learned a lot about personalities and feuds at the top of the CIA over the years. People would ask him what so-and-so was really like or why Helms and Richard Bissell didn't get along.

Powers, who like Helms began his career as a reporter for United Press International, has been a free-lance writer since 1970. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his reports on Diana Oughton, who was killed in 1970 in a bomb explosion that destroyed a New York town house being used by Weathermen. His first book was "Diana: The Making of a Terrorist." His second book was on the domestic impact of the Vietnam war, called "The War at Home."

As he began the reporting for his new book, Powers worried that the CIA might lead him down the garden path. At the end of his work, he thinks that some CIA people tried to misrepresent some things, but that there was no concerted plot to mislead him.

His book seems likely to disappoint both the CIA veterans who helped him write it and those foes of the CIA who find a drop of sympathy for the agency one drop too many.

It is by no means an all-out attack on Helms or the CIA, yet, Powers said, many of his sources to whom he sent copies of the manuscript "thought it was implacably hostile to the CIA." Powers adds: "They didn't understand how come I didn't get on board after they'd spent all that time talking to me."